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The challenges and gains of restudying community on Sheppey: young people's imagined futures

Dawn Lyon (University of Kent) and Graham Crow (University of Southampton)

Abstract

The 'Living and Working on Sheppey: Past, Present and Future' project took its starting point from the research undertaken by Ray Pahl and his team three decades ago on the Isle of Sheppey. In 2009-11, we revisited some of Pahl's archived material, and collected new (including some replicated) data and produced new materials, working collaboratively with community members of the Blue Town Heritage Centre on Sheppey. In this article, we examine the methodological challenges and opportunities of restudying communities in this way, including the question of collaborative research, and present some findings from one aspect of the restudy: young people's imagined futures in 1978 and 2009/10.

Introduction

Restudying communities is an inherently complex and ambitious research aim, both methodologically and substantively. It requires getting to know a community that no longer exists in its earlier form through the published accounts, raw data and (inevitably limited) contextual material of the project that is being revisited. And it means approaching a former research site anew, both informed by the earlier study as well as by new perspectives and questions about the life of the community. The debate on restudying communities has already pointed to the difficulty of doing restudies, and whether in fact they might be better conceptualised as new studies. In 2009-11, the Living and Working on Sheppey Project revisited the site, data and materials of Ray Pahl's Sheppey studies of the late 1970s and early 1980s, on which the modern sociological classic, *Divisions of Labour* (1984) was based. The current project team reanalysed some of Pahl's original data, complemented and replicated some elements of the research through new data collection, and produced new visual materials, working collaboratively with community members of the Blue Town Heritage Centre in Sheerness.

In this article, we discuss some of the methodological challenges and opportunities of restudying communities in this way, including the question of collaborative research. We present some findings from one strand of the research concerned with young people's imagined futures in 1978 and 2009/10, and discuss what this aspect of the research can contribute to our understanding of community over time. First, we outline the original Sheppey studies and the scope of the recent Living and Working on Sheppey project.

The original Sheppey studies

Ray Pahl's study of the Isle of Sheppey was neither a conventional nor an intended community study (in the tradition summarised by Frankenberg, 1969, and Bell and Newby, 1971). His aim was both more general and more particular: to undertake a 'detailed ethnography of ordinary people's lives'

(1984: 7), driven not by an ambition to understand Sheppey *per se*, but by a series of conceptual and empirical questions about contemporary social and economic change and its spatial context. Together with a team of researchers, he carried out a series of related projects in the late 1970s and early 1980s on the Isle of Sheppey. His insistence on historical understanding meant that they took great interest in the legacy of the 'occupational community' that arose from the presence of a single large employer at Sheerness Naval Dockyard, the closure of which in 1960 had far-reaching socio-economic and cultural consequences. His focus on what he identified as 'household work strategies' among couple-based households produced a significant analysis of 'social polarisation' between work-rich and work-poor households, and a broad understanding of work as formal and informal, paid and unpaid, and the interconnections between these different forms. This drew on and developed his earlier interest in how the old distinction between working-class and middle-class lifestyles was breaking down as working-class households with multiple earners were propelled upwards into the 'middle mass' while those households in which economic inactivity was concentrated became progressively more detached from the mainstream

Pahl's research on Sheppey can be understood as a study of community in that it sought to locate the phenomena he examined in a local social and historical context, and to make connections between particular phenomena and their wider community context, for instance youth unemployment on Sheppey and the history of the dockyard occupational community and its legacy of a culture of apprenticeships. However, his interests were bounded by specific sociological concerns which meant he did not attempt to study all dimensions of socio-economic and cultural experience, for instance, there is no attention to religion in the studies. We might nevertheless read his focus on work and households as a way into exploring community that pays particular dividends, because these aspects of social life are always contextualised in relation to schooling, housing, consumption, local politics, and so on.

The principal studies by Pahl and his colleagues were on school leavers (Pahl, 1978), on the experiences of young people growing up in and out of work (Wallace, 1987), a historical account of the former 'occupational community' associated with Sheerness Naval Dockyard (Buck, 1981), a one in nine household survey on family life and employment, in-depth interviews on household work strategies, a survey of employers, and a case study of an extended working-class family. Material from these projects is deposited in the UK Data Archive at the University of Essex (UK)¹. In combination and in

¹ School Leavers Study, 1978:

<http://www.esds.ac.uk/findingData/snDescription.asp?sn=4867>; Creation and Collapse of an Occupational Community, the Case of Sheerness Naval Dockyard, 1950-1980:

<http://www.esds.ac.uk/findingData/snDescription.asp?sn=4873>; 17-19 and Unemployed on the Isle of Sheppey, 1980: <http://www.esds.ac.uk/findingData/snDescription.asp?sn=4860>;

Isle of Sheppey Survey, 1981: Divisions of Labour:

<http://www.esds.ac.uk/findingData/snDescription.asp?sn=1986>; Social and Political Implications of Household Work Strategies, 1978-1983:

<http://www.esds.ac.uk/findingData/snDescription.asp?sn=4876>; Employers on the Isle of Sheppey, 1981-1985: <http://www.esds.ac.uk/findingData/snDescription.asp?sn=4854>;

retrospect, these strands of research amounted to a pioneering community study, with the whole significantly greater than the sum of the parts, in which community was more an integral part of the *method* 'for developing social scientific arguments' (Crow, 2008a: 131) than the *object* of study (Hall, 1990). In Pahl's view, this required an openness to other disciplines. He was himself a geographer turned sociologist, but one whose interest in the spatial dimension of who gets what stayed with him (Crow and Takeda, 2011). The methods used were also wide-ranging and included secondary analysis of census data, oral history interviews, surveys, in-depth household interviews, ethnography, the collection or production of visual data (photographs, drawings and paintings), and a form of grounded fiction. Although the overall study can be placed in a tradition of community studies that use mixed methods to comprehend in situ the everyday lives of ordinary people (Crow, 2000), the ways in which it took shape, over time, and with significant funding², meant it was both methodologically and theoretically innovative. This made the opportunity to undertake a (partial) restudy of the Sheppey research particularly appealing.

The recent project - Living and Working on Sheppey: Past, Present and Future

Since 2009, with the support of funding from the South East Coastal Communities Programme³, the 'Living and Working on Sheppey: Past, Present and Future' project has been revisiting some of Pahl's research. The current project concentrates on two strands of Pahl's work based on a combination of secondary analysis of selected data and new research complementing or replicating some of these data. It also takes inspiration from Pahl's general interest in the visual, and makes an original arts-based, visual contribution to exploring life and work on Sheppey. The project team includes academics from sociology and arts, staff from the UK Data Archive, the artists group Tea, and members (staff and community volunteers) of the Blue Town Heritage Centre, an information, resource and visitor centre in Sheerness on the Isle of Sheppey. Until his death in June 2011, Ray Pahl was an informal consultant to the project. That the project is a community-university partnership has significantly shaped its process and scope. Academic interest in older and younger people was a good fit with local concerns, and allowed us to produce materials of interest to community users as well as academics (a requirement of the funding scheme in addition to being intrinsically desirable) now available through the project website: <http://www.livingandworkingonsheppey.co.uk>.

The first strand of the restudy project was an explicit complement to Pahl's research (with Nick Buck) on the creation and collapse of an occupational community, based on eight oral history interviews (seven men, one woman) and historical documentary research. We collected an additional 33 interviews

Changing Sociological Construct of the Family, 1930-1986:

<http://www.esds.ac.uk/findingData/snDescription.asp?sn=4872>.

² Pahl had remarkable success in securing funding from several sources, including the then Social Sciences Research Council, and the Nuffield and Joseph Rowntree Foundations.

³ See: <http://www.coastalcommunities.org.uk/>. SECC is a pilot programme financed by the Higher Education Funding Council for England.

(25 men, eight women) with older members of the community to allow us to analyse the everyday experience and interconnections of different kinds of work – informal, formal, paid and unpaid – in the last years of the life of the dockyard in Sheerness and in the aftermath of its closure in 1960⁴. Our sample included a greater proportion of women than in 1981 permitting a broader understanding of the ways in which formal and informal work and employment associated with the dockyard were woven through the lives of individuals and households. Our semi-structured interviews expanded the range of topics in the original interview set, and included: Growing up: family life, education and looking to the future; Your working life; Family formation and housing; Blue Town and Sheppey; Geographical mobility; Social life and leisure; and Retirement, past and future.

A second strand of the research was a direct replication of an exercise undertaken by Pahl in 1978: the collection of essays written by school leavers imagining what their futures would hold in terms of work and family life⁵. Although Pahl undertook this sub-project early on in his time on Sheppey as part of a broader exploration of the island and the key issues he might consider in his research, our own interest was focused on two key questions. What is the attachment to place and other expressions of community in the taken-for-granted expectations and aspirations of young people across the two cohorts? And following Pahl's concern: 'How do young people view the prospect of leaving school when the likelihood of finding a job is slim?' (Pahl, 1978: 259), we asked: How do young people negotiate with the material and symbolic contexts of their present lives, in particular in relation to work and family futures?

A third aspect of the current project is an original arts-based, visual contribution to exploring life and work on Sheppey led by the artists group, Tea⁶. Taking Blue Town High Street as a starting point of a visual exploration of the past, present and future of life and work on Sheppey, Tea worked with younger and older people (including some of those involved in the other strands of the project) to record memories and imaginations of the past and future of Blue Town High Street, from which they produced a visual and aural montage of a journey along the High Street through time. In separate visits to the former dockyard itself, now a commercial port, Tea documented the locations of work referred to in the oral history interviews. For reasons of space and since this aspect of the project was artist-led, we do not discuss it further in this article.

This partial restudy could not hope to cover the range of Pahl and his colleagues' decade-worth of work (. Our own research makes use of the original Sheppey studies as a reference point and context, benefitting especially from the wealth of archived materials and access to the original

⁴ This material has not yet been analysed as there was no provision for analysis in the funding programme. We are preparing a further application for funding to complete this work.

⁵ In the 1978 collection, n=141 (89 boys, 52 girls); in 2009/10, n=110 (52 girls, 55 boys, 3 unknown).

⁶ The visual artists, Tea, are a collaborative group consisting of Peter Hatton, Val Murray, and Lynn Pilling. See: <http://web.me.com/val.murray/www.teaweb.org/Home.html>.

researcher (see Lyon et al, 2012 for a discussion of these aspects of the research process).

The methodological challenges and opportunities of restudying communities

One of the aims of the Living and Working on Sheppey project as a community-university partnership was to set up a research activity that could be pursued by members of the community beyond the formal duration and funding of the project. To achieve this, interviewers were locally recruited and trained by the project team to undertake oral history work on the legacy of the dockyard (strand one)⁷. Interviewees were directly recruited through the Blue Town Heritage Centre where there were many people keen to tell their stories. Where interviewers in the current project expressed a preference – on the basis of an ‘experiential affinity’ (Moffatt et al., 2005 in Edwards and Alexander, 2011) for instance - we sought to pair interviewers and interviewees to enhance understanding (Bourdieu, 1996).

Collaborating with community members was a strength of the project but one that entailed its own compromises. As Edwards and Alexander (2011) discuss, there are ‘trade-offs’ in collaborations between academics and peer or community researchers. They argue that whilst community involvement is usually positive for those involved and for the project in various ways, it does not necessarily produce better data. In our case, the aims and interests of the project team and the volunteer interviewers overlapped but were not identical. At times, this created a tension between the desire to present a positive picture of the local area and its people and the commitment to be critical social scientists. In addition, interviewers were often motivated by an interest in specific historical times, events or stories and were sometimes keen to elicit these in interviews, and were correspondingly less keen to place these in a wider comparative context.

Furthermore, although the training included role-plays and instruction in listening techniques and forms of attentiveness (Back, 2007), it was not always easy for the interviewers to apply these in practice. Some interviews were unsuccessful and had to be redone. Over time, it was the members of the Blue Town Heritage Centre who had already been closely involved in different aspects of the project who took a more central role in the interviewing than anticipated. More generally, our collaboration with members of the Blue Town Heritage Centre meant that we had regular conversations about the research design and our preliminary interpretations of the material, including simple clarifications of local references. This mitigated our status as outsiders, and helped us to avoid some of the difficulties Pahl faced. For instance, when the local press wrongly interpreted what came to be known as the

⁷ The training was delivered by Dawn Lyon and Tim Strangleman and took place across three two-hour evening workshops and covered: 1) an introduction to the project and to oral history, and a discussion of memory and the process of remembering; 2) asking questions, listening and note-taking in interviews; and 3) ‘elicitation’ in interviews using photographs and objects, ethical issues in life history work, and practical instruction in using digital recorders (delivered by Clive Arundell, University of Kent).

'Shadowlands' report, Pahl and Wilson were accused of negatively portraying young people on Sheppey, something 'it was very hard to come back from' (interview with Pat Wilson, January 2010), even though they had simply disseminated opinions that local employers had expressed to them during recorded interviews.

The sections of the oral history interviews that recount stories, events or everyday life are of both public interest and usable as research data for analysis. However, the absence of sociological knowledge meant that some areas of questioning, for instance, around the relationship between the formal and informal economy, might have been pursued in greater depth by academic interviewers. Similarly, our sociological understandings and critical perspectives on the concept of community were not necessarily shared by the interviewers – or indeed the interviewees. At times the interviews veer away from the topic guides into areas that are not relevant to the project. However, the benefits of the local knowledge of interviewers were tremendous, especially in relation to historical changes, or even quite simply, place and employer names. Furthermore, some interviewers made suggestions about the conduct of the interviews, as a result of which maps and pictures of older buildings were made available as prompts.

Our research on young people's imagined futures (strand two) was inspired by the methodology of the essay-writing technique used by Pahl (1978). We were fascinated by its potential also indicated by other research to uncover young people's aspirations, hopes and dreams (Bulbeck, 2005; Elliott, 2010; Himmelweit et al, 1952; McDonald et al., 2011; Thomson and Holland, 2002; Veness, 1962). Jane Elliott has argued that the content of essays written in response to the instruction to young people to imagine themselves in the future 'provides insights into children's understandings of the social world and their place within it' (2010: 1082). It is reasonable to suppose that adolescence is a time of heightened reflection on self, identity and how far futures will conform to previously predictable patterns. It is also reasonable to expect that the norms of the life cycle into which young people have been socialised will be open to question in the context of economic upheaval and uncertainty, such as that which characterised the later 1970s, when the gendered nature of these norms was being reassessed. Although we do not read the imagined futures written by young people as 'predictive, or constituting a type of plan that they expected to work towards', we see their narratives, following Sanders and Munford, 'as expressing their understanding of their present time worlds and the possibilities they see for girls and young women [as well as boys and young men] like themselves' (2008: 331). Although not predictive, how young people imagine their lives *prospectively* may well be very significant for how they go on to live them. As such, these reflective essays are a 'questioning exploration' which sheds light on how these young people may make their way through the world (Archer, 2007: 73, 65).

On a practical level, we sought to replicate the exercise in the interests of generating comparable data. We considered other more current ways of engaging young people such as using the visual (Mizen, 2005; Tinkler, 2008)

which might have been more appealing to them than the essay-writing activity - interestingly, accounts from 2009-10 tend to be shorter than those from 1978. The issue of how much researchers should change their research 'instruments' is of course a familiar one in all longitudinal research and it is widely-recognised that the use of different research tools diminishes the scope for comparative analysis across different time periods. In the absence of a record of the instructions given to teachers in 1978, we wrote our own, asking participants to 'Imagine that you are towards the end of your life. Look back over your life and say what happened to you'. We also asked them to sign consent forms.

In practice, the collection of essays from young people was a considerable challenge. It was difficult to find willing participants beyond the classroom and to achieve consistency in the sample. Although the 1978 essays were written by 16 year olds, in 2009-10, the relevant age group of the population of young people about to leave school included 17 and 18 year olds, making it difficult to access young people with a similar relation to the future as one another. One unintended similarity however was the similar socio-economic context of recession across the two periods of research, which had not been anticipated when the proposal for the re-study was being put together ahead of the 2008 'credit crunch'. As a result of these difficulties, the period of data collection extended over most of the 2009-10⁸ school year. This meant there was less consistency than with the essays collected by Pahl which were mainly written 'about ten days before they [pupils] were due to leave school' (Pahl, 1978: 259)

We have no information about the social characteristics of the essay writers, no details of their family or class backgrounds (cf Elliott, 2010). However, what is missing in detail is partly compensated for by the concentration of the setting. The social composition of the population of Sheppey was and is relatively narrow, and from this we can infer that shared general circumstances can nevertheless generate diverse imagined futures. Educational attainment in terms of qualifications remains low in Sheppey and is well below the average for the South East (18.6 per cent of the population in Swale have level NVQ4 and above compared to 30.8 per cent in the South East). Furthermore, Sheppey ranks highly on 'indices of deprivation', and life expectancy is as much as eight years lower in some parts of Sheppey than it is in other parts of Swale and the South East (Swale Borough Council, 2009). The value of these essays having a specific geographical reference point (even if the particularity of Sheppey may have diminished since the late 1970s) also allows for comparisons to be made with other areas, such as the deprived neighbourhoods of Teesside studied by Macdonald and his colleagues (2005) who found highly localised careers among young people whose job search was restricted to the limited spatial reach of their social networks.

In addition to collecting new essays, we attempted to trace essay writers from 1978, who would have been in their late forties in 2009. Despite numerous appeals through local newspapers, notice boards, and through informal

⁸ For simplicity, from now on, we refer to the 2010 essay writers instead of 2009/10.

channels, no one who had contributed essays in 1978 came forward. This was a disappointment, because similar tracing of participants in other projects has produced interesting results (see Goodwin and O'Connor, this issue, and Williamson, 2004), including rethinking the claims made by researchers in the original project, as Pahl (1984: 4) himself noted.

Young people's imagined futures

In *Divisions of Labour* Pahl argued that 'we must approach the notion of work in new ways' (1984: 1) and although the 1978 essays are not mentioned directly in the book, there are plenty of echoes of the forces described in the essays that shape how the trajectories of individuals' working lives unfold and the consequences that these can have for their households. The narrative device of contrasting the fortunes of two cases that from the outside appear to have very similar starting points is used effectively by Pahl. He compares the differing fates of two couples, Jim and Linda and Beryl and George, to convey the arbitrariness of the process of social polarization. In using this device Pahl follows the essay writer who recounts a successful life, married with children and grandchildren, wealthy enough to be living in a six-bedroom house, but who wrote:

'Sometimes I wonder what would've happened if I hadn't been lucky in business, if I didn't make the money I had now. Would I be like my school friend Mark who is still working at the factory job he found when he was sixteen, and how lucky I thought he was to take home £40 a week' (M15/1978).

The 1978 essay writers were among the first cohorts of school leavers to have to adjust to the move away from the old certainties of the Fordist era, and already in this remark it is possible to detect a re-evaluation of the idea of a job for life. It was passages like this in the essays that led Pahl to comment that 'I found the general level of awareness and introspection impressive and alarming' (1978: 60) – impressive for the sociological perceptiveness of the young people who wrote them, but alarming for the awareness of the constraining nature of their environment. It is clear from the 141 essays written by 16-year-olds on Sheppey in 1978 that they were well aware that the world was changing around them.

Perhaps it is unsurprising that the method of asking young people to use their imagination produces on the whole narratives that are readily intelligible and plausible rather than fantasies. As Elliott notes, the invitation to young people to imagine themselves at some point in the future 'allows scope for them to create a cast of characters with whom to share their imagined future world' (2010: 1082), but prominent among the resources on which they have to draw will be those of their everyday lives. One essay writer reflected on the task that he had been set by asking 'how can you right about something that has not happen or may never happen [?]' (M64/1978), but then discussed how career prospects were related to educational attainment, which in his case limited his options and he described how he joined the army.

Notwithstanding the perceptiveness noted by Pahl and others, young people are often depicted in public narratives, popular media, and community talk, as

unwilling to work, lacking in 'enterprise' or ambition and consequently blamed for their high rates of unemployment, in spite of facing (as in 1978) a bleak future as the labour market which they were set to join was characterised by historically high and rising unemployment levels, concentrated (then as now) disproportionately among young adults. This is an old theme (for instance see Veness, 1962) but one that resonates powerfully today, as it did at the time of the original Sheppey studies.

There has been lively debate about the empirical reality of detraditionalisation and individualisation, and the resultant 'de-standardised' or 'do-it-yourself biographies' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens 1992) for young people, notably in the *Journal of Youth Studies* (see most recently Roberts, 2012). Whilst many authors suggest that linear transitions are no longer the norm for young people growing up in the twenty-first century, and that traditional arrangements for instance with respect to gender have less of a hold, there is disagreement about the ongoing salience of class, the extent and significance of change, and what change means for how young people approach the future.

Woodman (2010) argues that 'young people must actively manage their biography in a new way', especially those with the fewest resources (2010: 737). Brannen and Nilsen's (2002) analysis does not find evidence of increased planning amongst young people pursuing so-called choice biographies. Indeed, they find, somewhat paradoxically, that those who envisage more traditional – what they call predictable - futures anchor them in fixed plans and projects. They argue for a situated and contextual understanding of young people's orientations, on the basis of the resources available to them. Further, Hockey's analysis of young couples in their twenties argues for greater variation within individual's orientations towards their futures (Hockey, 2009: 230).

In this section, we explore the absence and presence of the core themes of work, family formation, finance and housing, and mobility across the two sets of futures essays. As discussed above, the essays can be read as revealing taken for granted elements of future trajectories or stances towards the future as felt at the time of writing. Comparative analysis of the two sets of essays written thirty years apart draws attention to the extent to which elements of the life course are anticipated as specific to an age or stage of life, or are imagined as emerging from a more loosely structured 'choice biography'.

Table 1: The proportion (%) of essays writers who refer to key themes

Themes	Girls 1978 (n=52)	Boys 1978 (n=89)	Girls 2010 (n=52)	Boys 2010¹ (n=55)
EDUCATION²				
<i>Apprenticeships</i>	0%	34%	2%	2%
<i>College</i>	19%	12%	37%	27%
<i>University</i>	0%	3%	39%	27%
PAID WORK (main occupation)				
<i>Trades</i>	6%	52%	0%	18%
<i>Other manual</i>	8%	2%	0%	2%
<i>Forces</i>	4%	14%	2%	7%
<i>Sport</i>	0%	0%	0%	11%
<i>Clerical</i>	27%	6%	2%	0%
<i>Sales</i>	14%	6%	6%	4%
<i>Tourism</i>	0%	0%	8%	0%
<i>Care/body work</i>	21%	0%	29%	4%
<i>Professions</i>	4%	11%	23%	24%
<i>Multiple</i>	8%	3%	25%	15%
FAMILY				
<i>Marriage^{3,4}</i>	96%	75%	58%	55%
<i>Age met first partner</i>	60%	29%	17%	9%
<i>Age at marriage⁵</i>	73%	57%	23%	22%
<i>Length of courtship</i>	54%	26%	13%	4%
<i>Children</i>	94%	61%	61%	45%
<i>Age at first child</i>	52%	33%	19%	14%
<i>Grandchildren</i>	52%	13%	15%	9%
CONSUMPTION				
<i>Housing ownership</i>	60%	52%	29%	35%
<i>Money</i>	58%	63%	48%	51%
MOBILITY				
<i>Home: National⁶</i>	35%	19%	13%	13%
<i>Home: International</i>	6%	11%	23%	27%
<i>All international travel</i>	40%	39%	71%	62%

1. Three cases have been excluded from analysis of the 2010 essays as the gender of the essay-writers is unclear.

2. Education refers to post-secondary further or higher education or vocational training.
3. Figures include cohabiting where this did not later result in marriage (mentioned by one boy only, in 1978), divorce and widowhood, so represent the proportion of those anticipating marriage at some point over their lives.
4. In addition, 5% of the boys in 1978 and 4% in 2010 stated that they would remain single. Of the girls who made reference to family formation in both cohorts, none anticipated that they would never marry.
5. Refers to first marriage only. A very small number of essay-writers mentioned marrying more than once (2 boys and 2 girls in 1978 and 1 boy in 2010).
6. Includes elsewhere in Kent.

Education and paid work As might have been expected at the time, in 1978, one third of boys in 1978 explicitly imagined gaining an apprenticeship, although significantly, the essays also include some accounts of failure in this respect. By 2009-10, aspirations had shifted to University and Further Education College in equal numbers, each imagined by more than one quarter of boys (27 per cent). By 2009-10, girls' aspirations for further and higher education are even stronger, with more than one third imagining each (37 per cent and 39 per cent respectively), compared to one fifth imagining going on to further education in 1978 and none to university.

A particularly striking feature of the essays was that the culture of apprenticeships remained powerful, even though by this time nationally apprenticeship numbers had collapsed (Savage 2010: 255). This was especially the case among the boys (who, as was noted above, made up the majority of the sample). Pahl took a keen interest in the issue of apprenticeships, and later sought to encourage local employers to expand their numbers (Pahl and Wilson 1986), but already in 1978 it was clear to him that aspirations among the essay writers were overly-optimistic. As he argued:

‘The chances of 16 year old school leavers in this particular area doing anything more than unskilled work are very low. Last year, only about 10 per cent got apprenticeships or went into further education. This year the proportion is unlikely to be higher. The overall rate of the registered unemployed fluctuates between 8 and 12 per cent, but for youngsters it is evidently very much higher, particularly in the summer when it may reach up to 30 per cent’ (1978: 259).

Wallace also described how by the late 1970s ‘the tradition of skilled craft training for boys’ had been ‘broken’ (1987: 19), so it is instructive that a full third of the boys envisaged success in securing apprenticeships, despite the prospect of this being achieved having been in decline for nearly two decades following the closure of the Royal Naval dockyard at Sheerness in 1960. Aspirations to gain apprenticeships were not the stuff of fantasy, but they do suggest that there was something of a cultural lag between the expectations of the young people and the rapidly changing realities of their environment.

Certainly there were some essays that anticipated periods of unemployment lying ahead rather than a smooth transition from school to work, going ‘on to the dole with thousands of other people’ (M16/1978) or being ‘on the dole for six months after leaving school, until I got a job in a garage’ (M42/1978).

Some of the essay-writers anticipated getting a job only after adjusting expectations, for instance:

‘I gave up the hope of becoming a teacher as only about 1 in 100 people leaving college get a job...After having trouble finding a job I started to do childminding’ (F92/1978).

In terms of the type of work written about, over half the boys (52 per cent) imagined working in the skilled trades, which however respectable nevertheless reveal the reproduction of class aspiration (Willis, 1977). One in nine imagined some kind of profession, and a further one in eight, time in the Forces. By 2009-10, working lives were more varied, but there was double the proportion imagining a professional future for themselves (24 per cent), more than one in ten in sport (11 per cent), close to one fifth in skilled trades still (18 per cent), and one in seven (15 per cent) anticipating multiple or mixed occupations. A similar proportion of girls to boys in 2010 imagined a professional future (23 per cent) but there was more gendering in the semi-professional or semi-skilled work they anticipated, with more than one quarter in total anticipating body work (beauty, hairdressing etc, 14 per cent) or care work (15 per cent). This was a rise compared to 1978 (from 8 per cent and 14 per cent respectively). Exactly one quarter expected multiple or mixed occupations in 2009-10, significantly more than the boys. However, the main change from 1978 was a significant shift away from clerical work (from 27 per cent to 2 per cent) and even a decrease in sales and retail (from 14 per cent to 6 per cent).

Family formation

With respect to marriage, the difference between girls and boys in each cohort is striking, although the greater change in orientation between the two cohorts is amongst the girls. In 1978, almost all (96%) of the girls expected to marry, and none said explicitly that they would remain single; however, although just two anticipated divorce, one quarter of them described being widowed. By 2010, close to three fifths wrote about marriage, but interestingly none mentions divorce (and only two anticipate widowhood). An expectation of marriage therefore remains strong but not as dominant as it once was. Three quarters of the boys in 1978 expected to marry (two more than once, three who divorced and seven who are made widowers), a figure which declines to less than three fifths by 2012 (two being widowed and one marrying more than once, plus one cohabiting). What is interesting in these data is the *convergence* between girls and boys in 2010, a finding which echoes other research on young people’s expectations about marriage and family (Skrbis et al, 2011: 76). However, in reference to the 1978 essays, Pahl remarked that ‘Any suggestion that teenage magazines befuddled the girls’ minds with romantic dreams would be hard to substantiate from the evidence of these essays’ (Pahl 1978: 261); they contained several other narratives besides the standard romantic ideal of a classic white wedding followed by marital bliss. That said, the accounts are strongly heteronormative and there is no mention of homosexuality.

In 1978, the stage of life in which their relationships took shape was clearly important for the girls and three fifths of them specified the age at which they

first met their partner, a proportion which was double that of the boys. Two thirds of the girls were under 20 and one quarter between 20 and 24; just three mention meeting a partner at an older age, in short, a traditional pattern. Of those boys who mentioned the age at which they met their partner, they were more evenly spread between these two age groups (under 20 and between 20 and 24), and several were older. By 2010, the few who specify the age of first meeting their partner are nevertheless mostly in their twenties or even younger, with just two boys specifying that they were in their thirties. The length of courtship, once a significant element in the girls' accounts in 1978 and a notable presence amongst the boys' accounts, largely disappears by 2010⁹. At least for this sample, Hockey's (2009) argument that young women 'direct and 'manage' young men's orientations towards 'adulthood', often by asserting chronologised milestones' does not hold. What it does reflect however is the 'persistence of modernist age-based temporal structures' (Hockey, 2009: 228) amongst a minority group of both young men and women. Anxiety about achieving these milestones can even incite 'hyper-planning' (ibid).

The actual age of marriage was an important reference point in the girls' narratives in 1978, something mentioned by nearly three quarters of them, compared to less than one quarter in 2010¹⁰. For the boys too, this is an important milestone and nearly three fifths specify their age in 1978, declining to little more than one in five by 2010. However, what we see again in these figures is convergence between girls and boys in references to the details of their future partnerships. We can interpret this as a general decline in the significance of age of marriage, with a greater sense of freedom about the timing of this commitment, so evidence of a choice biography, and a decline in the extent to which it is a foundational plot in the narrative of contentment (Patterson et al, 2009: 440), if not one which refutes the content of that biography. Indeed, it might be that 'the fragmentation and decline of institutional structures and older certainties [...] actually heightens the significance of family for young people' (Wyn et al, 2011: 4). With this in mind, attachment to family cannot be read as meaning the same thing across the two cohorts.

With respect to having children, we note a strong reduction in gender differences between the expectations of girls and boys across the two time periods. From nearly 95 per cent of the girls and more than three fifths of the boys imagining a family in 1978, three fifths of the girls and fewer than half of the boys are doing so in 2010. Of those essay-writers who specified the age at which they would begin to form a family, in 1978, the majority of boys were clustered and evenly spread across the 21-24, 25-29 and 30-34 age groups, whereas amongst the girls, the most popular age group was 21-24, specified by three fifths of them. By 2010, fewer than one in five girls or boys mention

⁹ The majority who did mention this anticipated a courtship of less than two years, sometimes less than one, although more than a quarter of the girls in 1978 specified three to four years.

¹⁰ Whilst most anticipated marriage in their twenties in 1978, nearly one quarter of the girls imagined themselves to be under 20. By 2010, of the few who mentioned this, the age of marriage had generally increased.

their age at the birth of a first child but of those who did, the large majority refer to becoming parents in their twenties.

Almost all of the essay-writers who made reference to having children also specified the number of children they would have. Around one half of them anticipated having two children (this was constant by sex and cohort), and around one fifth, three children, increasing for boys in 2010 to around one third. Of those who specified the sex of their children, around two thirds of the boys (64% in 1978 and 67% in 2010) and an even higher proportion of the girls (79% in 1978 and 89% in 2010) anticipated having both a boy and a girl. Only two boys in 1978 and one girl, and two boys in 2010 and one girl say they will not have children. The ideal of the nuclear family in terms of composition does not appear to have changed across the two time periods, even if fewer aspire to create it. If anything, nuclear rather than extended family forms were more dominant. Whereas more than half of the girls referred to grandchildren in 1978, little more than one in seven did so by 2010. Boys' references to grandchildren were limited across the two cohorts but what is striking is the similarity of boys and girls in 2010 compared to the significant difference between them in 1978.

Consumption

So-called new flexible identities are based amongst other things on consumption. There is mixed evidence for this orientation in research on young people. For instance, in Patterson et al's (2009) study of young New Zealanders imagining themselves at the age of 80, financial success was imagined as something achieved over the course of their working lives and, for the young men, as the outcome of hard work, personal effort, and career success, and included the provision of a family home. For the young women it was predominantly seen as more of a 'familial rather than individual achievement' (Patterson et al, 2009: 442) associated with their own trajectories as carers as well as workers.

In the research presented here, somewhat surprisingly, references to money by the young essay-writers drop slightly across the two cohorts, from three fifths to one half. However, there are differences in the nature of these references. Whereas in 1978, for the boys, there was a sense of progression in financial status, connected to employment, by 2010, they more frequently write of having 'lived my life in luxury' without clarity as to how this was made possible, or being lucky including explicitly winning '*Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?*' Similarly, if the girls in 1978 were 'well-off' rather than 'rich', albeit with some recognising, along with the boys in their cohort, financial difficulties, by 2010, there is more emphasis on wealth disconnected from other elements of their accounts.

Pahl was keen to emphasise that in the late 1970s/early 1980s, the population of Sheppey stood out in their aspirations to owner-occupation, and achieved it more than might have been expected, despite it being a poor area, as a result of cheaper housing and a tradition of self-building/DIY and of self-employment. 'Most of these households in the middle mass own their own homes and, judging from the Sheppey Survey, gain substantial satisfaction

from creating a style of life based on small-scale domesticity', he wrote (Pahl 1984: 320). Wallace also comments that 'the image of the self-made, self-employed, and self-building man is a popular local archetype' (Wallace 1987: 13). Whereas in 1978, a relatively high proportion of young essay-writers referred directly to owning their house, by 2010, the figure had dropped, from more than one half to around one third, perhaps in recognition of the current economic context and the resultant difficulties of getting or staying on the property ladder.

Mobility

We get a sense of taken for granted ideas about young people in a 2009 interview with a youth worker who recalls the discussion of Pahl's contribution to debates on young people in the early 1980s. He comments:

'One of the things about the Isle of Sheppey is that there does appear to be a slight low self-esteem amongst people, it tends to get put down by a lot of people, Islanders, and there's lots of myths floating around. What was good about his [Pahl's] report was that it cleared up a lot of those myths, showed them to be unfounded. One of the myths was that young people never want to travel off the island so their employment prospects are very low because they want to stay on the Island, they don't want to travel. [...] It's true that if you ask young people if they haven't been off the Island much, they've been schooled on the Island and their first thought is if they've got to get on a train and change here and change there, it's going to be a mission, but that would be the same for anybody leaving school.'

As these comments make clear, young people were assumed not to have aspirations to settle off the Island, something which is contradicted by the essays collected in both 1978 and 2010, highlighting the contrast of myth and reality (Pahl 1984: ch.7; Wallace 1987: 14). Approximately half of essay writers in each cohort made reference to the locations they might live and work. The essays include both the reproduction of negative local images and a sense of wanting some better: to leave 'this domp of a place' (M64/1978); 'I would also dream of the day that I would leave the island for good' (F110/1978). Others refuse these representations of Sheppey, however, and talk about the importance of the island in relation to family and a sense of 'home' and belonging.

Between the two cohorts, there is a geographical shift from imagining living elsewhere in UK (including elsewhere in Kent) to moving abroad. If in 1978, more girls than boys imagined living elsewhere in the UK, most of this difference (10 per cent of the girls) is accounted for by a larger proportion of them imagining living elsewhere in Kent. By 2010, aspirations for mobility within the UK are similar, mentioned by one in eight of both boys and girls. Many mention London, but some refer to locations further afield, for instance Scotland or Cornwall, including places where they write that other family members live. The drop in aspirations of national mobility across the two cohorts is made up by the rise in aspirations of international mobility, referred to by one quarter of the 2010 cohort, compared to one tenth of the 1978 essay-writers. They write about going to live in the USA, Australia and

Europe. In particular, some of the 1978 boys imagine spending time 'seeing the world' with the Armed Forces. If we take into account all references to international travel, the figures increase significantly, with two fifths in 1978 and over three fifths in 2010. A very small proportion of both cohorts make explicit reference to staying on the island throughout their lives (6% of girls and 8% of boys in 1978; 6% of girls and 4% of boys in 2010), or to leaving but returning (4% of girls and 9% of boys in 1978; 0% of girls and 4% of boys in 2010).

Conclusions

Restudying Pahl's original research has allowed us to revisit the original study's topics and materials, add additional material to complement or counterpose them, and offer further interpretations both of his material and of the combined data sets. Restudies allow the temporal dimension of communities to be brought into the foreground, juxtaposing different time periods and moments. They are powerful approaches to trace the co-existence of both continuities and change and their interconnections. Although the changes Pahl and now we have studied on Sheppey include dramatic shifts, e.g. the closure of the dockyard, as well as sustained divisions, e.g. social polarisation, communities are always dynamic and usually diversifying (Crow, 2008b). Seeing how broad social trends play out locally is always useful as a way of capturing the meaning of those trends at individual and local levels as well as more widely.

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